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Saxophone Evangelism
Jazz Missionary Jessica Jones

"Did I say anything?" asks Jessica Jones at the end of our twenty-minute phone conversation. Given Jones's performance, recording, and teaching schedule – not to mention her duties as a mother – it's unclear how she has any spare time to think. Yet she says plenty: in response to each of my interview questions, one answer never proved enough. It's clear that what we really need is a fe hours over drinks – per question – to truly plumb the depths of Jones's musical philosophy.

The open sound of saxophonist Jessica Jones's compositions parallels this breadth of thought. "I always admire the people who can just go in one direction, but I tend to have my foot in a lot of things at once," she explains. In terms of her own career, at least, Jones doesn't buy into the model of musical individualism advanced by so much of jazz journalism. Instead, teaching, composing and playing are all of a piece. Jones's Web site, for example, contains not just the standard fare of sound files and impressive bio (she's worked with Bo Diddley, Don Cherry, Cab Calloway and Cecil Taylor to name just a few), but also intensely personal excerpts from the past twenty years of Jones's writing journal. "I think it's hard to take the responsibility of admitting I'm really a musician," reads one entry from about ten years ago, when Jones was in her early thirties. "That, and I have some physical image of what a musician is in my mind that I don't fit – of what a good jazz musician looks like."

When I ask Jones to elaborate on this somewhat cryptic comment, she launches into another many-tiered response. For Jones, part of this clash between self-image and public image is vocational. Historically, at least, the shining stars of jazz aren't remembered as teachers, much less as parents – yet Jones, who worked closely with Don Cherry, remembers him as one of many musicians carting his family around to practices and gigs. "In the avant-garde jazz thing, you always see the musicians with babies on their shoulders," she insists. According to Jones, gender is another source of the clash in her musical self-image. "When I was in high school," she recalls, "my wall was covered with [posters and pictures of] black men" – Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk among other early heroes – "and none of them looked like me." This visual dissonance surfaced as early as grade school, even before she settled on the saxophone as her instrument. "The first time I picked up a flute, I sounded absolutely awful and couldn't get a note out for two weeks. But I looked in a mirror and said, 'Oh! That's what I'm supposed to be playing,' because I looked like all those girls in junior high."

In the long run, however, this clash proved productive for Jones. "I think I kind of like being different, so it bothers me a little less," she says. "A lot of [gender discrimination] has to do with your perception. A lot of people would way there's no problem, and a lot would way that it's the only problem there is. It's not that it's not there, but you have to be strong and not let it enter. …Sound is sound to me. It's your life experience through your voice. You hav eto keep a check on your life, not your sound."

Jones may have trained herself to transcend the knottier gender issues in jazz as a vocation, but she's nevertheless thrilled to be working with a female teacher for the first

time in her career. “I finally have a woman teacher. …Somebody who understands what I’m saying, understands what I’m trying to do, understands what my problems might be due to my experience, but also musically – she’s just coming from a similar place musically.”

In Jones’s own teaching, however, gender equality is less of an issue than across-the-board equality of educational opportunity. Jones herself has been teaching almost as long as she’s been playing her sax. At sixteen, she joined a Berkeley youth program that paired teenagers with younger student pupils. Private music instruction, she soon discovered, “makes more money than anything else a teenager can do …leagally,” she adds with a grim laugh. Yet the rest of our conversation makes it clear that it’s everything but the money that fuels Jones;’s dedication to her teaching. “When you teach other people, it gives you a perspective on what you’re doing – it makes you more round. And anyway,” she adds, “it’s more real to live with a lot of generations at once.” Jones’s youth and community work has been praised and admied on both coasts, from her earlier involvement in the San Francisco Bay Area, to her current involvement with the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Part of the reason Jones is in such demand is her instructional flexibility, and her focus on her students. To Jones, helping kids find an effective means of expression is much more crucial than teaching them to interpret traditional notation. “Jazz is out of an oral tradition originally,” says Jones, further explaining this branch of her educational philosophy. “Until about a half a generation ago, it’s been learned by people listening, going to jam sessions, talking to older people, [but] ately it’s been taught in schools, with sritten music, in more of a literary tradition-type of approach.” To Jones, this academic approach to music education loses something in translation: “It doesn’t seems as authentic as doing it the way it’s always been done.” While the “authenticity” of various forms of jazz is a debatable and highly volatile issue in the jazz community, Jones’s students provide proof positive of this oral and aural jazz instruction. To focus on sound more than notes, Jones claims, not only gives students a better stocked toolkit for building their musical careers, but also helps them develop their voices at a crucial stage in their lives – a stage when their own voices are drowned out by role models and outside influences. According to Jones, when young students lok at scores and transcriptions, they think, “this is foreign to me, this is something I have to incorporate into what I am.’” As a method of instruction, Jones prefers instead “starting with the sound [the students are] already hearing in their heads, and translating that in the other direction. That tends to be how I work, is to get the kids – or anybody – to validate what they’re already hearing by bringing that out into the world, instead of always superimposing other people’s stuff on them.”

“Kids have a lot of stress,” Jones elaborates, “and they don’t tend to get respected in a way that makes them feel that their voice matters or that their thoughts are worth listening to. If they can start to find out [the value of such thoughts] before they get squished away and bottled up, then they can know that about themselves as they go out in the world.”

For Jones, well-channeled expression produces much more than a well-crafted tune. “The real underlying idea to me is that if we’re all expressing ourselves, we’re not going to be as frustrated. We’re going to be closer to peace, if people are really saying what they mean – and being heard.” - Jessica Baldanzi